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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 007226

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SUBJECT: MINISTER OF ICT AND ADMIN DEVELOPMENT PLEASED WITH NEW GOVT; SEES CHALLENGES IN NEW PORTFOLIO

REF: 2002 AMMAN 567

Classified By: AMBASSADOR EDWARD W. GNEHM FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D)

¶11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Reappointed Minister of Information and Communications Technology and Minister of Administrative Development Fawwaz Al-Zou,bi on Nov. 2 provided to the Ambassador an unusually candid insight into the formation of the new Jordanian government and the challenges facing administrative reform. He reviewed ongoing MOICT projects including the connection of schools to the internet, the construction of a broadband cable connecting Europe and Asia, the Framework Agreements recently concluded with Microsoft, and the privatization of Jordan's post office (mobile and fixed-line telephony issues will be covered septels). END SUMMARY.

THE NEW GOVERNMENT

¶12. (C) Unbidden, Zou,bi gave the Ambassador his impressions of the Aqaba retreat that the new Cabinet had taken with the King prior to the announcement of the new government. Of Faisal Al-Fayiz, the new Prime Minister, Zou,bi said that "at first we were skeptical that he would be able to carry (off (the restructuring and leading of the new government), but he surprised us." The most positive thing about the new government, however, was the feeling that it now was the King's government and that it had the King's full support) which, Zou,bi said, would make him much less likely to "take any B.S. from Parliament."

¶13. (C) Zou,bi was pleased with the overall quality of the ministers, though he singled out the Ministers of Public Works and Housing and Transport (Raed Abu Saud), Social Development (Riyad Abu Karaki), and Municipalities (Amal Farhan) as neophytes) albeit promising neophytes) who will "need a bit of handholding." In the case of Abu Saud, Zou,bi regretted that former Public Works and Housing Minister Husni Abu Gheida had not stayed on as the combination of the Ministries of Public Works and Housing and of Transport would be difficult enough without adding the ingredient of a Minister who is new to both. Abu Karaki also would have to adapt - he had freely admitted at Aqaba that he knew nothing of his job, and would likely face substantial frustration in trying to get things done in the civilian world after a career spent in the military. Zou'bi said that he found Farhan impressive, but that she had made clear to him her belief that neither she nor her Ministry should use computers until such time as she felt that they understood them and could use them effectively. This would be an obstacle for Zou,bi, as Municipalities is one of the ministries most likely to be targeted by the e-government push for which he will have responsibility in his capacity as Minister of Administrative Development.

ADMINISTRATIVE DEVELOPMENT

¶14. (C) Zou,bi admitted to the Ambassador that the scope of his task as Minister of Administrative Development was staggering to him, especially given the lack of resources. The new Ministry at least has a strategy, but it employs only 15 full-time staff led by an ineffective Secretary-General and supplemented by 20 second-rate contract personnel. With these resources, Zou,bi has been given a wide mandate to tackle complex and divisive government reform issues including capacity-building for e-government and right-sizing and shifting GOJ's employment structure. Zou,bi claimed, however, not to be too bothered by this state of affairs. He could either be given the proper resources to make reforms, in which case he would make them, or he could be denied such resources, in which case nobody could claim to be disappointed by his lack of progress.

¶15. (C) Zou,bi dropped strong hints, however, that the Ministry of Administrative Reform would be something that the USG might wish to fund, citing likely UK and World Bank involvement. He also alluded to probable clashes between him and Minister of Planning Bassem Awadallah in the coming weeks. Within a month, he will be holding a workshop with the Ministry of Planning and other stakeholders to plan out the course of the Administrative Reform program. He said

that while "everyone wants to see magic happen," the workshop participants will have to "find a way to balance the magic of Bassem Awadallah with the realism of Fawwaz Al-Zou,bi."

16. (C) On a more positive note, Zou,bi said that at least he will have a clear expression of the King's support for his goals as he goes to hammer out details with Awadallah: the King has given the new government three main goals over the next year: the formulation of a plan to restructure the civil service, the production of a strategy of clear "deliverables" to be realized over the next five years, and a separation between the offices of the Prime Minister and of the Cabinet which would guarantee that decisions would in the future be made collectively by members of the Cabinet rather than by the Prime Minister alone. The Ministry of Administrative Development will play the leading role in the civil service reform (though Zou,bi indicated that he does not plan to get ahead of consensus on this politically sensitive issue). The Ministry would also play an integral role in developing the strategy on "deliverables."

ICT PROJECTS

17. (SBU) Moving with relish to ICT issues, Zou,bi elaborated on the ongoing projects that the MOICT is pursuing. He characterized the implementation of e-learning as a process in which particular progress is being made, as tenders are out for the broadband networks connecting Jordan's universities and by March 2004 all 8 public universities are expected to be connected and running on the Internet. MOICT has also finalized a plan to connect 226 other Jordanian schools (it had received funding to connect 100 schools, then "discovered" that the layout of the 100 selected schools would allow 126 others to be connected at minimal extra cost) and will tender it soon. Zou,bi said that the wiring of these schools will be used as a model for a wider rollout of broadband connectivity to other schools as well as to the community Internet "access centers" being erected nationwide in rural and poor neighborhoods. He noted that training teachers to use the computers and having appropriate software available for them was as important as the basic connectivity.

18. (SBU) The Ambassador asked about the current status of the Levant Group's project to build a new Europe-Asia fiberoptic link through Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan (reftel). Zou,bi said that he had been in contact with Jim Miller, the American creator of this project, and that the Levant Group had just signed an MOU with Syria which had seemed likely to be the primary stumbling block for the project. The Lebanese Minister of Telecommunications was on board as well, and the project finally appears to be gaining some traction.

19. (SBU) Zou'bi updated the Ambassador on two "framework" agreements the GOJ recently concluded with Microsoft. According to Zou'bi, GOJ and Microsoft had negotiated a "Shared-Value Projects" Agreement, under which Microsoft and the GOJ would invest in promising Jordanian ICT projects as 50-50 partners without submitting the projects for tender but while remaining under the monitoring authority of a third party. GOJ and Microsoft had also negotiated a separate Enterprise Agreement, which provided for GOJ licensing of Microsoft software, which had included a condition that Zou'bi had pressed hard for: that Microsoft would invest 25% of the fees that they received from GOJ's licensing of their software in Jordanian ICT companies. Microsoft now apparently claims that the money invested in shared-value projects should be counted towards the 25% offset. Zou'bi expected the dispute to resolve itself in his favor soon, as Microsoft has as pressing an interest in the success of the agreements as the GOJ.

10. (SBU) Zou'bi said that he plans to privatize the Jordanian postal service this year. He had originally envisioned the service's privatization as a gradual, partial process, but now favors a swift and complete privatization. The past year, in which the postal service existed in corporate form (albeit 100 percent government-owned), was disappointing. There was no strong improvement service or profit.

COMMENT

11. (C) Zou'bi's commentary on the formation of the new government echoes those of other ministers with whom the Ambassador has met, reflecting a sense of strong royal support and cameraderie fostered by the Cabinet's retreat in Aqaba. Even that event retreat, however, does not seem to have dampened Zou'bi's distaste at the prospect of confronting Minister Awadallah over budget prioritization - a refrain that is commonly voiced or alluded to by other Embassy contacts within the GOJ. Embassy will follow up on the progress made on the fiber link and the dispute over the

Microsoft framework agreements.
GNEHM